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Reagan pledges to deploy SDI, not trade it away

 By Mary Belcher and Warren Strobel
 THE WASHINGTON TIMES

President Reagan yesterday promised to deploy the Strategic Defense Initiative once research and testing are complete, denying reports he would bargain away the proposed missile defense in arms talks with the Soviets.

The president's announcement followed a meeting with 17 Republican lawmakers, several of whom said they still believe the White House is going too slow on the missile defense program.

The meeting "was basically a failure," said Sen. Malcom Wallop, Wyoming Republican, who has been one of SDI's most ardent supporters.

"I still think there's a real weakness in the administration's understanding of the consequences of their actions," said Rep. Jim Courter, New Jersey Republican.

Messrs. Courter and Wallop both complained that the White House staff had "blurred" the conservative message they sought to bring to Mr. Reagan by inviting to

yesterday's meeting congressmen who are less ardent supporters of the SDI program.

Initially, eight lawmakers considered staunch supporters of SDI requested the meeting and were to have attended. But the guest list was subsequently expanded at the last minute to include a number of others.

"We thought that this would be a meeting of those who asked for a meeting," Mr. Courter said. "I felt that the meeting did not have the clarity and the focus because the people in the administration didn't want it to."

Mr. Wallop said: "They succeeded in pouring enough water on it that they couldn't taste the vinegar. . . . They [the additional legislators] were sort of to leaven us and they succeeded."

Mr. Reagan's offer to postpone deployment of SDI, popularly known as "star wars," for 7½ years is part of a larger proposal in a June 25 letter to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev calling for a 50 percent reduction in U.S. and Soviet offensive nuclear weapons.

see REAGAN, page 10A

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Mr. Gorbachev has been misinterpreted by people who have never seen the letter.

There is no "grand compromise ... to trade away SDI in exchange for getting the Soviets to join us in the offensive [weapons] reductions," the president later told a group of SDI supporters invited to the White House.

The Soviets, in ongoing arms talks in Geneva, have sought an outright ban on SDI research and development.

A senior administration official said Mr. Reagan is not drawing a fine line between research and deployment in terms of what is negotiable.

The president intends to stick to his publicly stated position to continue with SDI research and then sit down and discuss deployment with the Soviets, the official said.

But Rep. Jack Kemp, who attended the meeting, said the president may have acted on poor advice from his advisers.

"He [the president] has been told it's not a trade away," said Mr. Kemp, New York Republican. "I wish the people in the State Department would quit trying to get the president to negotiate away SDI."

The arms proposals in the Reagan letter to Mr. Gorbachev were generally backed by Secretary of State George Shultz and opposed by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger.

SDI, a ground- and space-based shield against enemy nuclear missiles, was first proposed by the president in a 1983 speech as a system to make nuclear weapons obsolete.

The plan, however, has come under sharp attack from liberals and advocates of existing arms control policies, who say a massive U.S. defense effort would provoke a new arms race.

Presently, the United States has no defense against enemy nuclear missiles other than the threat of a massive retaliatory strike.

Supporters of SDI, including the president, argue that a defensive system would limit the possibility of a nuclear exchange between the two superpowers and ultimately allow both nations to eliminate their

stockpiles of nuclear weapons altogether.

Yesterday's hastily arranged meeting with lawmakers was sought by the conservative congressmen, who had hoped to persuade the president to speed up, not delay SDI deployment.

But the president, backed by Mr. Weinberger and Lt. Gen. James Abrahamson, director of the Pentagon's SDI organization, said he firmly opposed near-term deployment.

"I know there are those who are getting a bit antsy, but to deploy systems of limited effectiveness now would deter limited funds ... or divert them and delay our main research," Mr. Reagan said in his public remarks.

"It could well erode support for the program before it's permitted to reach its potential," he said.

However, several lawmakers told the president exactly the opposite —

that his strategy of delaying SDI deployment already had begun eroding Capitol Hill support for the program.

Signs of that eroding support can be seen in the narrow one-vote margin by which the Senate beat back efforts on Tuesday to cut deeply into SDI's fiscal 1987 budget, several lawmakers told the president.

"What we were trying to tell him [the president] is the lack of coherence from those who represent him on the Hill is giving artillery to the opponents," Mr. Wallop said.

"I guess basically it's a massive disagreement in strategy," Mr. Courter said.

He said the legislators were told "we've got to wait until we have the whole [SDI] thing until we can do anything," he said. "It's a self-fulfilling prophecy of defeat."

In a separate development yesterday, the White House announced that U.S. and Soviet officials would meet

in Moscow next week to discuss negotiations on nuclear and space arms. The talks will help lay the groundwork for a September meeting between Mr. Shultz and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze.

The session "is intended to support the substantive negotiations in Geneva and the Sept. 19-20, 1986, meeting of Secretary of State Shultz and Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze in Washington," White House spokesman Larry Speakes said.

He said the meetings were part of a work plan leading to a proposed summit later this year between Messrs. Reagan and Gorbachev.

Participating for the United States will be arms negotiators Paul Nitze, Max Kampelman, Edward Rowny, Ronald Lehman and Maynard Glitman, as well as Richard Perle, an assistant secretary of defense, and Robert Linhard, a National Security Council aide.



Photo by Kevin T. Gilbert/The Washington Times
Lt. Gen. James Abrahamson Jr., director of SDI, shares a thought with Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger as they wait for President Reagan's talk to SDI supporters in which he denied "star wars" is a bargaining chip.